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AUTHOR Raze, Nasus
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ABSTRACT

An overview is presented of the California Mentor Teacher Program (signed into law in July, 1983) and the related issues of merit pay and master teachers. The operation of the Mentor Teacher Program, the first statewide program of its kind, is briefly described. The program is said to be an outgrowth of the merit pay and master teacher movements; therefore, lessons learned from these movements could be relevant to the mentor program. Issues involved in merit pay are listed including four objections raised by opponents and five characteristics which are common to successful merit pay programs. The master teacher concept and the controversy it has caused are summarized along with the description of a master teacher program which has been proposed by the governor of Tennessee. The opinions of several national organizations, national task forces, and Education Secretary Terrel Bell are presented on these issues. A four-item bibliography on merit pay is included. (DC)

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Nasus Raze

San Mateo County Office of Education
SMERC Information Center
Redwood City, CA 94063

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MERIT PAY AND MASTER TEACHERS

California's Mentor Teacher Program was signed into law as part of SB 813 in July 1983, the first such statewide program in the country. The program has tremendous fiscal and philosophical implications for the future of education in California. Mentor teachers will be nominated by committees made up of teachers, administrators, parents, and students, with the final selection made by the local governing board. Mentors will receive a $4,000 stipend and will assist junior teachers, spending up to 40% of their time outside of the classroom. This may involve changes in scheduling and the use of substitute teachers. As many as 5% of the teachers in a district could be designated as mentors. The program is slated to start in 1983-84 although lack of regulations and funding could delay it until 1984-85. Detailed regulations governing the program will be adopted in January 1984.

The Mentor Teacher Program grew out of the merit pay and master teacher movements, fueled by public and professional outcry over teacher salaries and the caliber of students majoring in education. In order to motivate effective teachers to stay in the classroom and to attract outstanding students to the profession, many current reform proposals combine elements of merit pay and the master teacher concept. Can educators learn useful lessons from past experiences with merit pay and master teacher programs? What are the problems and possible solutions?

Supporters of merit pay contend that it encourages good teaching and works well in industry. Merit pay has been opposed by teacher unions and others on the grounds that:

- There is no fair way to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers.
- Merit pay encourages competition rather than cooperation among teachers.
- The quality of education cannot be improved by this system.
- Merit pay threatens teacher job security.

Despite the failure of many past teacher merit pay programs, several current efforts have shown success. Features common to these programs include:

- Letting teachers plan their own individual programs, earning merit points in areas they select.
- Offering a choice of awards not limited to cash.
- Rewarding teacher cooperation with merit pay for team efforts.
- Keeping awards confidential.
- Maintaining a low profile for the program.

The master teacher concept has a familiar ring to educators who remember the differentiated staffing movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Differentiated staffing created a career ladder for teachers with vertical levels of responsibility and salary. This system differed from merit pay in that the teaching levels involved increased duties, not merely higher pay for performing the same job better. The NEA and AFT opposed the concept of differentiated staffing, and the movement stalled due to lack of state support, low funding, scant research on its outcomes, and negative reactions from teachers.

In Janary 1983, Education Secretary Terrel Bell called for higher pay for master teachers who would be selected by their peers to serve as mentors for their colleagues. Master teachers would earn significantly higher salaries. Bell met with opposition from the NEA and AFT who saw this idea as an extension of merit pay. The National School Boards Association supported Bell's idea but opposed a national mandate. Although this proposal and many that followed it use the term "master teacher," most combine aspects of merit pay and the career ladder for teachers.

Echoing Secretary Bell, Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander proposed the Master Teacher Program for his state. This program is a pay incentive system to reward excellent teachers and includes a four level career ladder with additional duties at the higher levels. A teacher at the apprentice level must reach the professional level after three years or be dismissed. Another important feature of the Tennessee program is an appeal process available to teachers denied certification at the senior or master levels. The Tennessee legislature has postponed action on the Master Teacher Program until April 1984. Other states becoming involved in merit pay and master teacher experiments include Florida, Virginia and Oklahoma.

The NEA opposes any compensation based on "subjective evaluation," student achievement, or grade and subject taught. The latter objection has implications for the issue of possible higher pay to retain math and science teachers. The AFT does not support merit pay but has stated that teacher career ladder plans may be items for negotiation. In fact, the AFT calls its qualms about the proposed Tennessee Master Teacher Program "minor."

The National Commission on Excellence in Education and the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force have recommended rewards for teaching excellence and master teacher programs in their educational reform proposals. The bipartisan Merit Task Force of the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor recommended that states raise basic teacher salaries and that experiments with performance-based pay be encouraged. Recent surveys have found that 80% of the general population and 63% of teachers support merit pay.

In order to succeed, the new generation of incentive plans must address the issues of attractive base salaries for teachers, well-defined evaluation procedures, adequate funding, staff morale, and public acceptance. The trend toward combined merit pay and master teacher programs may pave the way for significant changes in teacher compensation, with improved school effectiveness as the goal.

Nasus Raze
SMERC Information Center

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The following materials are available from the SMERC Information Center.
Call 363-5447.

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